

1) The special precepts (which relate to each of the Three Jewels separately)

This section has a further two subdivisions:

- I. The proscriptive precepts – they refer to the actions one should refrain from
- II. The prescriptive precepts – they refer to the actions one should engage in

I. The proscriptive precepts

The **Great Final Nirvana Sutra** says:

*Those who take refuge in the Three Jewels
Come closer to the truly virtuous
They never take refuge
In other gods.*

*Those who take refuge in the sublime teachings
Harbor no harmful, murderous thoughts
Those who take refuge in the assembly
Do not associate with those who hold extreme views.*

Therefore, as described in the **Great Final Nirvana Sutra**, there are three proscriptive precepts each pertaining to taking refuge in one of the Three Jewels. These three precepts are:

- a) Refraining from taking refuge in gods (pertains to taking refuge in the Buddha)
- b) Refraining from engaging in harmful actions of body, speech, and mind directed toward other sentient beings (pertains to taking refuge in the Dharma)
- c) Refraining from associating and agreeing with those who hold wrong views (pertains to taking refuge in the Sangha)

a) **Refraining from taking refuge in gods**

Once we take refuge in the Buddha we should not give up our trust in the Buddha. We should avoid taking *ultimate* refuge in anyone other than the Three Jewels (this was explained in handout 10, page 1: "*The way to take refuge by refusing to acknowledge other objects of refuge*"). Ultimate refuge refers to taking refuge for the purpose of attaining liberation or enlightenment. Therefore, we should not take *ultimate* refuge in the god of the Abrahamic faiths (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) or in Hindu gods like Brahma, Indra, Vishnu, etc.

Likewise, we should not take ultimate refuge in spirits, local guardians, nagas, and so forth.

However, this does not mean that in general we cannot take refuge in particular gods, spirits etc. for other purposes. We can take refuge in them in order to obtain rebirth in the celestial realm or to achieve particular worldly goals that do not contradict Buddhist principles, just as we take refuge in, that is, consult a physician, for instance, to recover from an illness.

b) **Refraining from engaging in harmful actions of body, speech, and mind directed toward other sentient beings**

Once we take refuge in the Dharma we should avoid harming other sentient beings, since non-violence is the foundation of the Dharma. Therefore, our relationship with other sentient beings should be based on this principle of not harming others.

We should make a constant effort to increase our introspection and mindfulness so that we do not even harbor negative *thoughts* towards others.

Regarding the treatment of animals, we should not hit them, tie them up, or inflict any kind of pain on them. Thus, we should also avoid becoming responsible for the killing of animals by eating meat.

In case we harm other beings it is crucial to generate regret and to resolve to abstain, or to at least reduce such actions in the future.

c) **Refraining from associating and agreeing with those who hold wrong views**

Once we take refuge in the Sangha we should not associate and thus come to agree with those who hold views that are in contradiction to Buddhist principles.

This precept is particularly important when we have not gained a deep understanding of the Dharma yet, and when our practice is still preliminary and weak. At those times we are easily influenced and swayed into thinking that there are no past and future lives, that our actions do not have any consequences, and so forth.

In fact our refuge is vulnerable until we reach the path of seeing, for only when we become Aryas our refuge is made firm by the direct realization of emptiness and of the four noble truths.

However, this does not mean that we should dislike those who hold extreme views. In fact, we should respect their beliefs, and make an effort to generate sincere love and concern toward them.

II. The prescriptive precepts

There are also three prescriptive precepts each pertaining to taking refuge in one of the Three Jewels

- a) Revering images of the Buddha (pertains to taking refuge in the Buddha)
- b) Revering writings on the Dharma (pertains to taking refuge in the Dharma)
- c) Revering members of the Sangha (pertains to taking refuge in the Sangha)

a) Revering images of the Buddha

Once we take refuge in the Buddha we should have the same reverence for any image or representation of the Buddha (e.g. a stupa) as we do for the Buddha himself. The purpose for displaying and keeping images of the Buddha is to remind us of the Buddha when he is not actually physically present. Therefore, we should honour and respect all the images equally as if they were the Buddha himself. We should not evaluate them according to their material, shape, colour, size, or artistry.

Nagarjuna says in his ***Letter to a Friend***:

Just as the learned worship an image of the Sugata

Whatever it is made of, even wood...

We should not keep the images we like and discard those we do not like. We should not put Buddha statues we prefer in the front of the altar and those we like less in the back but rather give them an equal place of honour. We should not sell them for profit or pawn them, but regard them as an invaluable field of merit, for just as a farmer's field that is tilled well yields an abundant harvest for the farmer, the field of merit when revered properly yields great spiritual progress for the disciple. The reason for the latter is that every time we honour and revere the field of merit we plant positive seeds that eventually ripen in extremely beneficial positive energy that helps us to overcome obstacles and develop our mind.

There are three factors to an action of body, speech and mind that determine how positive or negative an action is:

- i. The motivation of the person engaging in the action
- ii. The nature of the action itself
- iii. The power of the field or object that the action is directed toward

This explains how even a small action done without a particularly positive motivation that is directed toward a powerful object or field such as the Buddha or the Sangha can yield very powerful positive results.

Therefore, when we see a painting, a statue, a stupa, etc. that are poorly painted or crafted we should be careful not to criticize the actual image but the artistry. The great Tibetan yogi Jangchub Rinchen once showed a statue of Manjushri to Pandit Atisha and asked him, "How is this [Manjushri]?" Atisha replied: "Manjushri can only be beautiful but the artist is mediocre," and respectfully put the statue to his head.